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The Urge for intermediality and creative reading in Angela Carter's "Impressions: the Wrightsman Magdalene"

Karima Thomas

- 1 "Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene" is Angela Carter's swan song. It was published posthumously in a collection of short stories dealing with literary, iconographic and cinematographic representations¹. The title is programmatic of the "pictorial project" of the short story. First, it signals a twofold pictorial frame: "Impressions" belongs to pictorial language and conjures up the Impressionist movement in the reader's mind²; second, to the informed reader and art specialist, it bears a direct reference to Georges de La Tour's *The Magdalene and Two Flames*, bought by Mr and Mrs Charles Wrightsman and offered to the New York Metropolitan museum.³ The reader is already aware of the hybrid fabric of a narrative that intertwines the pictorial and the textual. The intermedial urge of the text is highlighted and the reader is warned that he is about to enter a haunted zone, where "suspicion" is the only shield against misreading⁴.
- 2 The narrative is built around two distinct narrative lines, one embedded in the other. The first narrative line tells the story of the journey of Mary Magdalene to Saint Baume where the wayward girl is to become the repentant saint. This quasi-hagiographic account is then set against the pictorial representation of the repentant saint in de La Tour's *The Magdalene and Two Flames* and a series of similar representations of the life of the saint.
- 3 The second narrative line is a first-person narrative. It tells the journey of the narrator in the maternity ward and the trance she experiences while looking at an imaginary candle flame, a detail cut out of de La Tour's real painting which shows a backlit candle flame reflected on a mirror fixed by Magdalene's gaze. The real painting is the link between the two narratives.

- 4 In this tentative reading of "Impressions", I will try to analyze the modes, functions and consequences of the intercourse between the textual and the pictorial. My objective is to show how the operations of expansion, conversion, internalization and reinvention carried out in the iconotext are part of a wider compulsion for intermediality. Its objective is to perform the permanent construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings out of existing cultural artifacts. The different movements operating in and through the text illustrate the intercourse between the sister arts and the esthetic and hermeneutic questions that their alliance arouse in the reader's mind.

I- The image in the text: three possible movements

Movement one: expansion

- 5 De La Tour's painting is part of the diegesis. Actually, it can be seen as "the pregnant moment", the propitious event to which the narrator adds a beginning and an end (Louvel 2010, 229). The narrative captures the static temporality of the painting and expands it into a before and an after ; into a fantasized journey preceding Magdalene's meditation and a fantasized outcome brought about by her meditation. Both journeys originate in Western iconographic representations of Mary Magdalene. The interaction between text and image results in the expansion of the image by its insertion into an imaginary sequential temporality. As for the text, it feeds and thrives from a plethora of Western iconographic representations of Mary Magdalene.

- 6 The narrative is shaped as a series of different iconographic representations cut from an art book or borrowed from an art gallery and set one next to the other.

In Georges de La Tour's painting, the Magdalene's hair is well brushed. Sometimes the Magdalene's hair is as shaggy as a Rastafarian's. Sometimes her hair hangs down upon, is inextricably mixed up with, her furs...

Sometimes she wears only her hair ; it never saw a comb, long, matted, unkempt, hanging down to her knees. She belts her hair round her waist with the rope with which, each night, she lashes herself, making a rough tunic of it. On these occasions, the transformation from the young, lovely, voluptuous Mary Magdalene, the happy non-virgin, the party girl, the woman taken in adultery - on these occasions, the transformation is complete. She has turned into something wild and strange, into a female version of John the Baptist, a hairy hermit, as good as naked, transcending gender, sex obliterated, nakedness irrelevant.

Now she is one with such pole-sitters as Simeon Stylites and other cave-dwellers who communed with beasts, like St Jerome [....] Now she looks like hairy Enkidu [...]

But there is another way of looking at it. Think of Donatello's Magdalene in Florence (Carter 410- 411)

- 7 Each new paragraph becomes the frame of a new painting, portraying a different profile of Mary Magdalene as seen by different artists. The informed reader can trace the voluptuous Magdalene to a theme illustrated by Caravaggio or Domenico Puligo⁵ ; the voluptuous woman anointing the feet of Jesus then wiping them with her hair to Dieric Bouts in *Christ in the House of the Pharisee* (Lahr 73)⁶ ; the naked sexless Magdalene to Metsys (Haskin 234)⁷, the hairy Magdalene to the fifteenth century German tradition⁸, and the image of the cave dweller to Pierre de Besse or Bernini (Haskin 256). A new paragraph provides a close-up of the gaunt creature sculpted by "Donatello". Another passage frames the image of the self-mortifying Magdalene who "belts her

own hair round her waist with the rope with which, each night, she lashes herself, making a rough tunic of it" (410).⁹ Even if the names of the painters are not always mentioned, the descriptive saturation of the text enhances its visual orientation. The ekphrastic pauses that permeate the text disrupt the narrative flow and introduce a new rhythm to which the reader cannot remain indifferent.

- 8 At a closer reading, it is tempting to see that the narrative dissects and exposes the pictorial mix that foregrounds de La Tour's painting by expanding it into a rich diachronic journey over the different representations of Mary Magdalene's life. Although not in a chronological order, the text provides the reader through inter-pictorial references with the hagiography of the Mary Magdalene, from the voluptuous wayward girl, to the hag-like repentant sinner. The ongoing movement from one description to another encodes the rhythm inherent to the reception of the image in the text. The narrative changes the temporality of the painting and brings to the fore the temporality of the reading act. Actually, the multiple interruptions corresponding to the time needed by the reader to shift his gaze from one painting to another as he walks down the imaginary gallery of paintings drawn by the narrative onto his inner screen creates a hectic temporal flux.¹⁰ Thus, the narrative implements a sequential temporality that supplants the condensed temporality of the pictorial.¹¹
- 9 The expansion operated by the narrative is also meant to set the painting in psychologically realistic grounds and to unfold the discourses underlying it.¹² The narrator justifies the geographical setting of de La Tour's painting in pseudo-objective¹³ terms: "Because Mary Magdalene is a woman and childless she goes out into the wilderness. The others, the mothers, stay and make a church where people come" (410). The narrator invests the story and the iconographic tradition that foregrounds it with a political discourse that points to the dichotomous representation of women according to whether they are mothers or not. This dichotomy is at the heart of the story and can be summed up by the narrator's address to the reader: "Note how the English language doesn't contain a specific word to describe a woman who is grown up, sexually mature and *not* a mother, unless such a woman is using her sexuality as her profession" (410). Departing from the painting and the narrative, the quote adopts the style of a statement, of a fact. It becomes an element of a feminist discourse that explains that like the sexually mature woman, who does not find a signifier in the English language, Mary Magdalene in de La Tour's painting, as well as in many iconographic representations, does not find a place in society and is often depicted in a cave, in seclusion or in the wilderness outside of the confines of society.
- 10 The interaction between text and image allows the image to overflow its space and time: through a historiographic fancy, it unveils the political discourse underlying the production of the painting. The narrator performs the role of a feminist reader who finds in the colors and the setting of the painting (darkness and seclusion) the opening from which to leap into the discourse underlying the containment of unregulated sexuality. Marina Warner explains that the image of Mary Magdalene in its association of physical beauty with temptation as well as subsequent practice of bodily mortification "condenses Christianity's fear of women" (Warner 232).
- 11 The discursive dimension brought about by the text/image intercourse also opens up to various readings. This dimension culminates in a passage that performs or encodes the viewer's questions about the alleged subject of the painting, namely repentance:

Georges de La Tour's Mary Magdalene has not yet arrived at an ecstasy of repentance, evidently. Perhaps, indeed, he has pictured her as she is about to repent – before her sea voyage in fact, although *I* would prefer to think that this bare, bleak space, furnished only with the mirror, is that of her cave in the woods. But this is a woman who is still taking care of herself. Her long black hair, sleek as that of a Japanese woman on a painted scroll [...] Her hair shows that she has just used the mirror as the instrument of worldly vanity (411, 412, my emphasis)

- 12 This passage introduces a first-person narrator, and a discourse akin to an art historian's interpretation of the motifs, lines, colors of the painting. It questions the predominant interpretation of the painting as an emblem of repentance and unravels the power of a painting to capture an intermediary moment and to arouse contrasting discourses. The intercourse between text and image as captured in this passage bears witness to the energy and dynamics that the painting brings to the text and the rhythm that the text reveals at the heart of the painting.
- 13 The second movement that results from the intercourse between text and image in Carter's story is conversion.

Movement two: conversion

- 14 Conversion is much like translation in so far as it deals with the passage from one code to another. Louvel compares the conversion from a picture to a text to the operations involved in translating a text from one language into another. This implies various operations of modulation, compensation, transposition, adaptation and reformulation. But like in any translation there are aspects of the source text that do not travel well : either something is lost or something is added during the voyage. As a result, the target text is not another version of the original. It is a new product (Louvel 2002, 149). This is even more obvious when translation concerns two different semiotic systems. The iconotext is the new fabric that is borne out of the intercourse between text and image. Louvel draws the attention to its "oxymoronic" nature (Louvel 1998, 15). Right from its taxonomy, the iconotext underlines the tension at work in its creation, hence the tensions that run through it when it deals with the translation of the instantaneous into the sequential, of the visible into the sensorial.
- 15 By essence, a painting is meant to be seen at one shot. It is true that we move up and down the canvas, left and right and back and forth again and again, but the first reception is global and instantaneous. De La Tour's painting in Carter's short story appears to the viewer in a different light. Viewing the painting is no longer instantaneous. The global perception characteristic of the visual arts is challenged by the progressive disclosure characteristic of the diachronic nature of the linguistic chain. What is more, Carter's text fragments the painting, presents a different detail at a time, thus delaying indefinitely the final disclosure of the whole. The skull is not mentioned for example until the final sentence of the short story.
- 16 The delay is caused by the interplay of the visual and the sensorial. In fact, the image in the text becomes a new artifact, subject to the viewer's gaze and senses. Actually, between the different descriptive fragments appears the narrator/art viewer's perception. The first reference to de La Tour's painting is : "Georges de La Tour's picture *does not show* a woman in sackcloth, *but* her chemise is coarse and simple enough to be a penitential garment, or, *at least*, the kind of garment that shows you were not thinking of personal adornment when you put it on" (409-410, my emphasis).

This first representation of the painting shows a reader oscillating between the position of art specialist, distinguishing de La Tour's work from the prevailing iconographic representations of the repentant sinner as a Venus in sackcloth, and an amateur, whose subjectivity is felt in the fragmentation of the sentence. This subjectivity emerges also from the verbs and expressions of comparison and approximation. To the narrator, the chemise "does not *seem* to disclose flesh as such, but a flesh *that has more akin* to the wax of the burning candle" (410, my emphasis). The narrator's double-fold posture is confirmed when he addresses the reader, saying "so *you could say that*, from the waist up, this Mary Magdalene is on the high road to penitence, but, from the waist down, *which is always the more problematic part*, there is the question of her long, red skirt" (410, my emphasis). On the one hand, the description shows a schematised gaze, distinguishing the two parts of the painting like a diptych. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the descriptive sentence by the non-restrictive relative clause betrays the narrator's anxiety. The intercourse of the descriptive and the narrative shows that the painting is metamorphosed from an external object of the gaze into an internal sensory experience, subject to the narrator's interrogations, fears and even desires. This passage performs the way the image opens the eye of the text by creating an intermedial zone that addresses the reader's affect as much as his sight or his cognition¹⁴. This zone transcends the painting and the text *per se* and flirts with some imaginary figurations on the reader/viewer's inner walls – figurations screened out of the fears and desires borne out of the image/text intercourse. It is in this sense that we will read the descriptions of the imaginary painting that occupies the last part of the short story, a materialisation or a performance of the intermedial zone.

Movement Three: Within the intermedial zone or on the fringes of a pictorial third

- 17 The image/text intercourse in "Impressions" culminates in a scene that performs the advent of a new image, doubly painted on the narrator's as well as on the reader's mind. Its advent is to be interpreted in the light of what Louvel defines as the pictorial third, a real or an imaginary floating image akin to what Descartes calls "an image in the air". It is built out of the text and may refer to a real painting or to an imaginary one created in the reader's mind. In this sense, it is the reader's painting since it is not a replica of the one sketched by the narrator.¹⁵
- 18 In "Impressions", a detail is extracted/cut out from de La Tour's canvas ; it is removed from its pictorial context and is promoted into a painting on its own. The flame of de La Tour's painting becomes in the narrative a painting of its own, a kind of a "word painting".¹⁶ The narrative vests it with a quasi-ekphrastic representation. The passage from the real painting to the imaginary one is set in a dream-like context. First, the source image is described in these words : "now [Mary Magdalene] is gazing at the candle flame, which doubles itself in the mirror. [...] but now, instead of reflecting her face, the mirror duplicates the pure flame". Immediately after, a first person narrator enters the text, declaring : "when *I* was in labour I thought of a candle flame" (412, my emphasis). A complex operation of displacement is set in motion through which the first person narrator embodies the role of the meditative Magdalene. The narrative, in a mirror-like effect, frames the experience of the narrator in front of the candle flame

in such a way as to double that of de La Tour's Magdalene. The baroque scene of a mystic meditative trance is converted into a scene of a trance experienced at the maternity ward. Like Magdalene, the narrator looks at the flame and experiences a trance. A hidden voice surges to define a new viewing/reading program :

Look at the candle flame as if it is the only thing in the world. How white and steady it is. At the core of the white flame there's a cone of blue, transparent air ; that is the thing to look at, that is the thing to concentrate on. When the pains came thick and fast, I fixed all my attention on the blue absence at the heart of the flame, as though it were the secret of the flame and, if I concentrated enough upon it, it would become my secret too.

Soon there was no time to think of anything else. By then, I was entirely subsumed by the *blue space*. Even when they snipped away at my body, down below, to finally let the baby out the easiest way, all my attention was on the core of the flame.

Once the flame had done its work, it snuffed itself out ; they wrapped my baby in a shawl and gave him to me.

Mary Magdalene meditates upon the candle flame. She enters *the blue core, the blue absence. She becomes something other than herself.* (412-413, my emphasis)

- 19 The vocabulary of seeing and the references to forms and colors highlight the visual nature of the passage. The imperative form directs the reader/viewer's attention to the zones of focus, and sets a new viewing program. In fact, if we consider Deleuze's conception of art as the site where forces are captured, then the reception can also be the advent of the recreation of new forces. This is the phenomenological experience described in the above-mentioned extract. De La Tour's painting is far removed from the imaginary painting borne into the reader's mind. Yet, the latter traces its origins back to "The Wrightsman Magdalene". This is not a paradox, it is rather inherent in the nature of the reminiscence of a painting, a reminiscence that plays the twofold role of a screen in so far as it reflects and casts backs impressions (Louvel 2010, 207). The passage textualizes the effect produced by the painting on the narrator, and thus casts it in a new light. For instance, the color blue is not at all present in de La Tour's image, but its absence is symptomatic of an aesthetic system influenced by a moral discourse. The presence of the blue color in the trance scene produces a new painting that makes the reader rethink his perception of cultural artifacts.
- 20 In fact, this new painting is the result of a displacement and a condensation of two cultural representations. The blue color belongs to the iconography representing the sanctity of the Virgin Mary as the narrator has previously explained.¹⁷ The flame belongs to de La Tour's *Magdalene and Two Flames*. Like in a dream, signs from different spaces and cultural codes come together. The idea is to draw a parallel between the dematerialization of the woman in both iconographic traditions.
- 21 In fact, the hypnotizing effect of the candle flame carries the narrator into another dimension, into an almost ethereal status. She is so absorbed by the candle light that she no longer feels the birth pangs. For a while she is abstracted from her worldly situation, her body is an absence. The narrator underlines forcefully the motif of absence that haunts de La Tour's painting. In fact, in de La Tour's painting the mirror in front of Mary Magdalene does not reflect her. Like a phantom, de La Tour's Magdalene does not cast a reflection on a mirror. Paradoxically, what predominates is the candle flame, doubly represented through its reflection in the mirror. De La Tour's *Magdalene and Two Flames* dematerializes the woman, mystifies her desires by casting them in Christian lights : the only passion and the only love it enhances are those for Christ, hence the Flame, a symbol of Christian revelation. According to the narrator's reading,

de La Tour's painting encodes a discourse that by sanctifying a woman deprives her of her identity as a sexual being, and as Carter insisted elsewhere, "All the mythic versions of women from the myth of the redeeming purity of the Virgin to that of the healing reconciling mother are consolatory nonsense ; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother Goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods." (Carter 1997, 5)

- 22 On an aesthetic level, the description of the trance of the narrator before an imaginary candle flame produces an imaginary painting, with impressionist brush strokes, hence the title of the short story : "Impressions : the Wrightsman Magdalene". Actually, the narrator's trance is conveyed from an impressionistic narrative point of view. It is shaped out of approximations and comparisons introduced by 'as if' and 'as though'. The colors are hazy ; the blue oscillates between transparency and absence. In sum, the painting is a "floating impression" marked by the instability of its signifiers. A constant slippage between the real and the imaginary, between the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and the narrator is set into motion. The narrator as a viewer of de La Tour's painting comes to grasp it according to the etymological definition of the French word "comprendre", that is to say to englobe (Picard, 131). In other words, the narrator internalizes the image, makes it her own. What is happening at this level is a regression of the narrator into a pre-linguistic stage wherein meaning is developed through images. The detour via the real and the imaginary paintings allows the narrator to visualize and rethink through images her identity as a woman and her iconographic representation over history as a saint or a sinner, mother or wayward girl. In each case, representations show her as "something other than herself", a cultural construct.
- 23 It is worth considering however that the narrator, while internalizing de La Tour's painting, reinvents it and plays with it. In fact, she enters into a dream-like sphere, the imaginary world of the "as if" and "as though", just like a child enters the transitional zone of playing to master the pains of the absence of the mother. As if under a magic spell, she enters the blue absence and she no longer feels the birth pains. However, she remains aware that this is just role-play. The dividing line between playing and being is clear : "once the flame had done its work, it snuffed itself out." (412) Here the narrator, after playing the role, plays with it by keeping a voluntary suspension of disbelief in the magic spell of the candle flame and the revelation that it symbolizes.

II- The New Hermeneutic Project and the Urge for Creative Reading

- 24 The nature of meaning and signification is a theme that runs through "Impressions". The short story performs the process of meaning as the product of impressions left on the viewer's mind by the real painting and the fears, desires, thrills brought by the sensorial experience inscribed in the iconotext. As it oscillates between the textual and the pictorial, the iconotext generates a new hermeneutic process. Actually a compulsion for intertextuality and intermediality runs through all of Carter's works. Every narrative is woven out of a plethora of texts and images, a saturation of semiotic codes that ultimately alters the concept and the process of signification. What is at stake through this aesthetic choice is Carter's conviction that meaning is the product of cultural representations. The iconotext becomes the medium *par excellence* to embody

the floating and fleeting nature of significance, since it unveils it as a mere construct made out of the dialogue of various artifacts and cultural representations.

- 25 The idea of the floating and illusive nature of meaning haunts the short story, its title, its textual structure and motifs. "Impressions", the enigmatic title of the short story, puts in high relief a concept central to the idea of the nebulosity of meaning. Impressions can refer to reminiscences or mental images. They can also refer to blurred allusions that give an impression without reaching a fixed and clear idea. Whether the first or the second interpretation, some structuring leitmotifs run through the text and bring to the fore the nebulosity of meaning. The episode of the trance is a case in point. The hypnotic effect introduced by the imperative form transports the reader into a sphere outside the referenced time and space : "look at the candle flame as if it is the only thing in the world....that's the thing to look at, that's the thing to concentrate on" (412). In this dream-like sphere, no fixity is allowed and meaning becomes allusive, and I am tempted to say, illusive.
- 26 The unnamed references contribute to disrupting meaning. Throughout the short story, many phrases or descriptions signal the intrusion of an external reference in the narrative flow. This is not always easy to prove, but the reader is confronted with a feeling of incongruity, the feeling that this phrase or this description belongs somewhere else and that it is a quote, or an allusion to an unnamed text or painting. Whether able to check this allusion or not, the reader is always left with vague impressions, blurred reminiscences that bring to mind a teeming army of images and ideas. The new dynamics introduced by the text-image intercourse requires a new reading posture, a reader willing to change his focus, to look things up whenever he suspects an extra-textual reference within the text. The text, with its untitled references, weaves a hide-and-seek motif into its texture, a playful and erotic motif, since every veiled reference invites the reader to unveil it as in a slow "strip-tease show" to borrow Louvel's comparison. Meaning becomes a perpetual reconstruction and approximation depending on the reader's encyclopedic skills.
- 27 The text is no longer a site of meanings but of cues to an infinite and thrilling quest, though no Grail is at the end. The text/image intercourse performs the tension at the heart of meaning construction, the succession of references, adding a visual layer to text, the textual instability apparent in the intermingling of the narrative, the descriptive and the overtly discursive ; all this bears witness to "the disjuncture" permeating the iconotext (Louvel 2010, 252), thus disrupting the construction of meaning. Several signs of this disjuncture are to be seen on the textual level. For instance, while describing Magdalene's dress in de La Tour's painting, the text oscillates between the external (the canvas itself) and the internal (the reader's perception and interpretation of the painting), between the objective and the subjective, between the visible and the sensorial, between reason and affect:

Left-over finery ? Was it the only frock she had, the frock she went whoring in, then repented in, then set sail in ? Did she walk all the way to the Sainte-Baume in this red skirt ? It doesn't look travel-stained or worn or torn. It is a luxurious, even scandalous skirt. A scarlet dress for a scarlet woman (410).
- 28 The succession of questions, each new one more pressing than the previous, the use of some stark and blunt expressions (whoring in) illustrate the mounting tension of the narrator, her inability to comply with the meaning stressed by the symbols and motifs of the representations of Mary Magdalene in de La Tour's painting and other similar

representations of the repentant sinner. The passage introduces a narrative and a textual gap in so far as it interrupts the ekphrastic flow and introduces the reader's questioning reception. At a visual level, the succession of question marks introduces extra-linguistic graphic signs, embodying the disruption of the linguistic chain and bringing home intonation as a new element in the construction of signification. This is confirmed a few lines down, with a new series of questions illustrating the tension introduced by the text/image intercourse: "but why has she taken her pearl necklace with her? Look at it, lying in front of the mirror. And her long hair has been most beautifully brushed. Is she yet fully repentant?" (410) The questioning culminates in suspecting the very discourse underlying the representations of Mary Magdalene, to whom de La Tour devoted many paintings, one of which was entitled "The Repentant Magdalene". (Lahr, 96)

- 29 The text-image intercourse also disrupts the narrative structure and makes the constitution of meaning all the more difficult. In fact, the narrative starts as a third person narrative, imitating the oral tradition. The narrator addresses a listener to whom he repeatedly says: "don't run away with the idea [...]", "don't forget" (409). The narrative itself respects a rhythm, born out of the repetition of the same phrasal structure and the same opening for a succession of sentences: "She walked until she came to the forest of the Sainte Baume. She walked until she came to the remotest part of the forest. There she found a cave. There she stopped. There she prayed. She did not speak to another human being, she did not see another human being..." (409). The folk-tale like narrative structure is suddenly disrupted by a more factual reference to the painting and the painter and is again followed by a long ekphrastic passage devoted to the painting, yet permeated with the narrator's subjective reception of this painting. The reader is to follow back and forth to grasp the different meanings suspended in the air and aroused by previous narrative segments. The textual rhythm and the reading rhythm it encodes undermine signification because "the oscillation confronts the subject with an infinitely elusive meaning, meaning which vacillates in the interlaced space of the visible and the sensible" (Louvel 2002, 173, my translation)¹⁸
- 30 Considering the self-reflexive dimension of the narrative in "Impressions", I am tempted to read a hint of the transience of meaning in the delayed reference to the skull. Although clearly visible in de La Tour's painting, the skull, symbol of the *momento mori* motif, is not mentioned until the last word of the narrative: "But something is already born out of this intercourse with the candle flame. See. She carries it already. She carries where, if she were a Virgin mother and not a sacred whore, she would rest her baby, not a living child but a *momento mori*, a skull" (413). The only revelation that results from the long meditation is an allegory for transience. This final reference to the painting performs an additional movement from the text back to the image. It is as if to remind the reader that the meaning will never be sealed up and that it is, as usual, mediated by an artifact, in this case a new detail from the painting. The iconotext and the new hermeneutic project it entails alter the reading posture in a significant manner.

III - Performative narrative and creative reading.

- 31 The narrator of "Impressions" performs the viewer's reception and reading of cultural artifacts. Her descriptions, comments, questions, comparisons, conversions,

expansions, appropriation and reinvention of the painting illustrate the way the viewer reacts to the painting. But the reader of "Impressions" has to cope not only with the painting but also with its interactions with the text.

- 32 The Carterian narrative encodes the role of a mobile reader, now an expert able to recognize the allusions made by the text; and now a seeker of *jouissance* trying to unveil one by one the ambiguities, the nebulous articulations of the text. Whether one or the other, this reader is in all cases intent upon negotiating meaning. In a word he is a creative reader. As the site of the intercourse of a complex network of iconographic representations and artistic readings, "Impressions" invites the reader to travel back and forth from the text to the images and vice versa. He has to check his encyclopaedia of iconographic representations, see the paintings mentioned by the text, guess the ones described but not named, and again visualize the imaginary ones. Sometimes, this reading demands thorough research which allows the reader to avoid what Picard calls "mis-reading". It also demands a new reading ethic founded on the need to "look things up", as Carter herself says (Kenyan 26). Michel Picard in *Essai sur l'Art comme jeu* insists on this point and goes as far as calling it "an ethical demand to be informed"¹⁹ (Picard 40, my translation). Does this mean that the reader should become an art historian? The answer is no. The text with its profusion of references impels him to get informed, but through its shadowy zones and its blank spaces it also gives him the opportunity to be imaginative and creative. Some of the paintings which are described but are difficult to identify play this role. Others are simply a patchwork, a result of condensation and displacement of items from various motifs into an imaginary painting. In all this, the text becomes a form of what Carter calls "an exercise in a certain kind of erudite frivolity that does not do good *as such*, but offers cerebral pleasure of the recognition of patterning" (Carter 1993, 19). As a consequence the reader becomes a creative reader who according to Carter, "can rearrange the book in an infinite number of ways, like a Rubic cube." (Carter 1993, 11)
- 33 The repeated address to the reader, the multiple questions and the exhaustive references show that the text encodes the profile of this creative reader, a reader willing to take part in painstaking efforts to negotiate meaning. This posture is materialised through the quasi dialogic nature of the narrative which exhorts the reader to "Look" "to think" "to consider" and to "see the point". The whole text becomes a negotiation zone. What is at stake is an uneasy transaction²⁰ that is summed up in the narrator's final remark "but there is another way of *looking* at it" (411, my emphasis). The choice of the verb "to look" is not random. The pictorial saturation brought about by the references conjures up sight as a new means of cognition. In fact, the text conjures up all the senses to contribute to the construction of the multifaceted aspects of meaning, making it all the more illusive. At one point, even smell plays a role in the construction of meaning. The reader is invited to "smell the odour of that kind of sanctity that reeks from [Donatello's representation of Mary Magdalene]. It's rank, it's raw, it's horrible". The detour via the text and the iconographic heritage performs the necessary distance, literal as well as metaphoric, that the reader has to adopt in order to grasp the meaning. Seen in this way, meaning has nothing to do with REVELATION. Instead, it is a negotiation, a permanent appearance/disappearance of impressions, left by the multiple representations on the reader's mind.
- 34 Even if the negotiation of meaning is painstaking, it is also a source of pleasure. When the narrative line is suspended by the descriptive passages, the reader is accompanied

into a passionate guided tour through different paintings, whose contents are unfolded by the text like extracts from a booklet delivered in an art gallery. The reader's curiosity is aroused to the extreme. The multiplication of references, details and interpretations develop a sort of hermeneutic vertigo, an exaltation that satisfies his epistomophilic compulsion (urge to know), which is according to Picard a sublimated version of the primary urge to see (scoptophilic urge) (124-125).

- 35 "Impressions", with its obsessive oscillation between text and image embodies the culmination of Carter's compulsion for intermediality. This compulsion has been present in embryo in almost all of her works. The references to Rops' etchings and to Fragonard's miniatures are part of the construction of meaning in *The Bloody Chamber*, and references to Surrealist paintings shape the *Infernal Desire Machine of Doctor Hoffman*. But far from being a means of transmitting meaning via an iconographic detour, the image in "Impressions" contributes to creating a new dynamics in the textual fabric. The energy it diffuses shows meaning as the result of a complex alchemy whereby existing cultural artifacts are expanded, translated, converted, or juxtaposed with earlier ones. Meaning proves to be just an impression, a vague idea or image born out of the encounter of these cultural artifacts and their textualisation.

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NOTES

1. Angela Carter, "Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene", *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*, London: Vintage, 1996.
2. The various definitions of the word 'impression' involve the idea of the image or its ersatz. For instance, an impression can be: "a deep and long lasting effect on the mind or the feelings of somebody; unclear or uncertain idea, feeling or opinion; appearance or effect of somebody; impressions of somebody: funny imitation of the behaviour or way of talking of a well-known person: the students did some impressions of the teachers at the end of the year; mark left by pressing something hard into a surface." *Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary*. The different definitions of 'impression' imply something close to the original yet not exactly the same since it is colored by the subjectivity of the viewer. This is important to the understanding of the hermeneutic project developed in Carter's writing as I will show later in this paper.
3. It is interesting to underline that the painting referred to in the title is not considered as de La Tour's but Wrihstman's. Here, it is the material canvas more than the artistic product that is brought to the fore. This also suggests that the painting belongs to those who behold it as much as to the painter himself.
4. Analysing *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Liliane Louvel writes "the title and the book cover are signs of intermediality; at this level, an atmosphere of suspicion is set in motion, drawing the reader's attention to other pictorial allusions. The informed reader is being warned." (Louvel 2010, 237) "... le titre et la page de couverture sont des signaux d'intermédialité, c'est alors " " l'ère du soupçon " qui se lève pour repérer les autres allusions. Le lecteur alerté est mis en garde." (Louvel 2010, 237)
5. *Saint Mary Magdalene*, Domenico Puligo, in Jane Lahr, *Searching for Mary Magdalene* (79). Or *Christ in the house of Mary and Martha* by Jacopo Robusti (Lahr 70). Or again *The Conversion of Mary Magdalene* by Caravaggio in Susan Haskin's, *Mary Magdalene: the Essential History*, 257.
6. *Christ in the house of the Pharisee* by Dieric Bouts the Elder (Lahr 73).
7. Metsys' *The Penitent Magdalene* (Haskin 234).
8. Susan Haskin writes: "St John's lustful sin couples him with Mary Magdalene and, like him, she becomes affected by the imagery of the wild man in German art for from the mid-fifteenth century, she is often shown covered, except for her face, breasts, feet and hands, in a kind of fur which seems to grow from every pore." (233)
9. This is a condensation of various motifs in different paintings that show the Penitent Magdalene scourging herself and her lashes becoming part of her flesh.
10. Louvel underlines the link between the motif of the gallery and the creation of a rhythm and underlines the consequence of this rhythm on the reception. She says: "The gallery-tour motif introduces into the narrative a new rhythm that follows the viewer's subjectivity. It is a matter of rhythm because the text is punctuated by the appearance of the painting, of the image in the text. None of the two media loses its specificity, instead, each acquires more energy, thus giving the affect a new dimension" (Louvel 2002, 226-227) "Le temps, ainsi réintroduit par le parcours de la galerie, avance au rythme de la subjectivité.

C'est bien de rythme qu'il s'agit lorsque le texte est scandé par l'apparition de la peinture, de l'image en texte... L'intérêt de la chose étant qu'aucun des deux média n'y perde sa spécificité mais y gagne au contraire un surplus d'énergie, produisant une redimensionalisation de l'affect." (Louvel 2002, 226-227)

11. Condensed temporality should not be mistaken with Lessing's classification of painting as an art of space opposed to the arts of time. Actually, de La Tour's painting itself points both the emblems of vanity; and to her future: the contemplative gaze and the skull point to the present in *The Magdalene and Two Flames*. Carter's choice of this painting in particular expresses her desire to shed light on a phase of transition. This overtly mentioned in a passage that we will study below.

12. The painting itself does not carry a discourse, and has in no way a discursive dimension, contrary to François Whal's theory. However it invites the viewer's comments and the writer's lengthy essays. Louvel refers to "Walter Sickert, a conversation" by Virginia Woolf where the narrative becomes a hybrid narrative essay (Louvel 2010, 36-37). The esthetic dimensions of some paintings or photographs are sometimes neglected because of the discourse to which the painting gives way. A case in point is the exposition entitled *Controverses* which took place in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2009.

13. According to Mikhaïl Bakhtine, pseudo-objective motivation consists in feigning to defend an argument by giving deliberately weak or illogical justifications, thus creating laughter or surprise among the readers. (Bakhtine 126).

14. Liliane Louvel writes: "The oscillation sets the reading subject in front of the infinitude of meanings; meanings always figurative, always somewhere between the visible and the sensorial". (Louvel 2002, 173) "L'oscillation place le sujet à l'infini du sens toujours figuratif, errant quelque part dans l'entrelacs du visible et du sensible." (Louvel 2002, 173)

15. "'The pictorial third', the text/image intercourse, conjures up something else, something that acts in between. This pictorial third would be a floating image (virtual or real, 'an image in the air' as Descartes would have put it; Wollheim refers to the floating nature of two superposed experiences). This image is suggested by the text but is still an image borne out of words, an image that can refer us back to an extra-textual painting but also to an imaginary painting (or one of its substitutes) to be reconstructed by the reader; an image that belongs to the reader; it is his own invention, since it does not repeat the one expressed in the text by a narrator engulfed in his own inner vision." (Louvel 2010, 260) "Le tiers pictural entre le texte et l'image fait advenir autre chose, ce qui joue entre les deux. Ce tiers pictural serait l'image flottante (virtuelle ou 'réelle' au sens de Descartes, une 'image en l'air' et Wollheim évoque la qualité "flottante" des deux expériences qui se superposent) suggérée par le texte mais qui reste une image suscitée par des mots, une image qui peut renvoyer à un tableau dans l'extra-texte mais aussi à un tableau ou un de ses substituts) imaginaire à reconstruire par le lecteur; image qui sera alors sa propriété, son "invention" puisqu'elle ne coïncidera jamais avec celle qui fut mise en texte par le narrateur plongé dans sa vision intérieure." (Louvel 2010, 260)

16. Expression used by R. Flaxman, quoted by Louvel (2010, 250)

17. "The Virgin Mary wears blue. Her preference has sanctified the color. We think of a heavenly blue. But Mary Magdalene wears red, the color of passion.

The two women are twin paradoxes. One is not what the other is." ("Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene" 410)

18. "L'oscillation place le sujet à l'infini du sens toujours fugitive, errant quelque part dans l'entrelacs du visible et du sensible." (Louvel 2002, 173)

19. "Une exigence éthique de se documenter." (Picard 49)

20. Louvel explains that "The instability of the iconotext, its ongoing oscillation which is borne out of the text/image intercourse, fascinates the writer and the reader because it sets them endlessly in the sphere of transaction and negotiation and imposes on them a dynamic and active writing and reading practice (...) It is a real operation, which accounts for the choice of the word 'transaction'; it is an operation of conversion, of change too, 'a change of relations and, like with the monetary conversions, there is always some remaining sum, a difference in value which must be paid somehow. There is never an exact count. In fact, in the iconotext, this remaining entity corresponds to the role of the imaginary, left suspended, between the two" (2002, 149). "Cette instabilité de l'iconotexte, son oscillation sans fin qui résulte de la mise en rapport du texte et de l'image, fascine l'écrivain et le lecteur car elle les loge constamment dans la transaction, la négociation et leur impose une écriture ou une lecture dynamique, active, là où l'image donne l'impulsion à travers le texte, à travers la parole, qui lui permettent de se lever. Il s'agit bien d'une opération, ce qui rend bien le terme de transaction, d'une opération de conversion, de change aussi. 'le change de rapport'. Et comme le change opéré entre deux monnaies, il y a toujours un reste, une différence de valeur dont quelqu'un paie le prix. La balance n'est jamais exacte, le compte ne tombe pas juste. Le reste est alors la part d'imaginaire laissé en suspens, entre deux" (2022, 149).

ABSTRACTS

"Impressions : The Wrightsmans Magdalene" est la dernière nouvelle écrite par Angela Carter. Elle a été publiée dans un recueil de nouvelles dédiées à la représentation littéraire, iconographique et cinématographique. Etant une référence explicite à un tableau éponyme de Georges de La Tour, le titre de cette nouvelle annonce d'emblée son projet pictural. La pulsion picturale investit aussi bien le style que la structure narrative de la nouvelle. Le tableau de Georges de La Tour est au cœur de la nouvelle. Il est le point de départ de la trame qui s'en inspire pour situer les événements dans un contexte historiographique. Mais le projet de Carter ne se limite pas à traduire en récit une représentation picturale. Cet article analyse les modes, fonctions et conséquences de l'interaction entre le textuel et le pictural. Mon objectif consiste à montrer que les opérations d'expansion, conversion, internalisation et réinvention font partie d'une pulsion pour l'inter-médialité, une pulsion qui illustre le mouvement permanent de construction et déconstruction du sens à partir de productions artistiques existantes. Les différents mouvements qui opèrent dans le texte et entre le texte et ses différents intertextes illustrent le rapport entre les différents arts et les questions herméneutiques et esthétiques que ce rapport suscite chez le lecteur.

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